

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2001

First Prize: Megan Parker, Redmond Junior High

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." This was once said by the great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Holiday, 1995-2001). Has his dream come true? Do we really live in a society that is completely rid of racial prejudice? Our society today still has people who judge by the color of a person's skin, not by what really matters, what is inside.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. His parents taught him an important lesson that he passed on to many others: treat all people with respect. While Martin was growing up in Atlanta he noticed that his home was awfully segregated. Blacks were not treated as equals to whites. As a child, he had a white friend. After the first day of school they were not allowed to be friends anymore because of their society.

When Martin was old enough he went to college. He wanted to become a minister like his father. He learned about Mahatma Gandhi at a seminar. He believed in Gandhi's way of non-violent resistance, which proved useful later in his life. Another significant influence in his life was Henry David Thoreau and his essay "Civil Disobedience." It showed him that someone could create a successful and peaceful revolution by not obeying unjust laws. At college Martin met his future wife, Coretta Scott. They were married in June 1953. He received his Ph.D. in 1954. He then moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he became a pastor for the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

Over the rest of his lifetime he worked to bring equality to all races. He played a major role in the civil rights movement. He helped lead the march from Selma, Alabama to the capital, Montgomery. King also led the march on Washington in which he led 37,000 people to the front of the Lincoln Memorial, and the bus boycott in Montgomery that lasted for 381 days. Over his lifetime he made many important and well-known speeches including his most famous, the "I Have A Dream" speech on August 28, 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, which 200,000 people attended. He was also honored with many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He divided up the prize money, \$54,000, and gave it to organizations that worked for civil rights. His work gained voting rights for African-Americans on August 6, 1965. He gave his final speech on April 3, 1968. It was about reaching for the mountaintop. He said, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." (Holiday, 1995-2001) The next day, April 4, 1968, James Earl Ray assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. King was a great influence on the civil rights movement. The attitudes have changed dramatically since then. We still are not there yet though, we have not reached the mountaintop. There is still racial prejudice left in the world and in our country. We are not of the most powerful nations in the world. If we cannot accomplish our goal then how are we supposed to expect others to change also? As King once said, "America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood." (Holiday, 1995-2001) He was absolutely right, too. We need to set an example for the future generations, and as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. showed, one person can make a difference. If one person changes his or her attitude, who knows how many will follow in his or her path. As King once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." (Holiday, 1995-2001)